

Public Health column for Independent Record

April 8, 2011

By Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department

Sleep Tight, Baby, But Sleep Safe

Twice a year, a group of local residents gets together for what must be one of the grimmest meetings imaginable.

They're experts in the fields of health, social services, law enforcement, and related disciplines, and they're known collectively as the Fetal, Infant, and Child Mortality Review (FICMR) team. Their unenviable job is to review the circumstances surrounding every death of a child from Lewis and Clark County.

The purpose of the FICMR team is not to assign blame for these heartbreaking deaths. Rather, it's to look for patterns or trends among them in the hope that the team can identify ways to prevent similar tragedies in the future. They work in strict confidentiality.

From a public health perspective, the death of an infant or child can be a measure of a community's overall social and economic well-being and health. FICMR is a critical process in identifying health or social issues that our community has a responsibility to address, whether through policy change or education.

In the past two years, the Lewis and Clark County FICMR team has reviewed more than a dozen deaths of fetuses and children up to age 18. The members have noticed a pattern: Several of these deaths involved infants who were sleeping in circumstances that may possibly have contributed to their sudden fate.

Could these deaths have been prevented? We'll never know. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS, is the number one cause of death nationally in infants between 1 month and 1 year old. Many of these deaths can never be explained. Our hearts go out to the families whose lives it has shattered.

Steps to Safer Sleep

But the pattern here has prompted the local FICMR team to issue a strong recommendation to parents, grandparents, babysitters, and other caretakers: take steps to provide the safest possible sleep environment for your little one.

Put baby to sleep on its back, at every bedtime and naptime. This is the number one way you can reduce the risk of SIDS. When your baby gets old enough to turn over on its own, you don't need to reposition it.

Keep baby's sleep area close to, but separate from, yours. Sleeping in the same room as your baby reduces its risk of SIDS; health experts recommend it until your baby is at least six months old. But baby shouldn't sleep in the same bed with you or anyone else because of the risk of suffocation. The risk is

even greater if you're a smoker, very tired (and what new parent isn't?), or under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or medications that make you sleepy.

If you like to bring baby to bed to breastfeed, put it back in its own bed when you're done. If co-sleeping is a traditional part of your culture, consider placing a cradle, bassinette, or bedside cosleeper right next to your bed instead.

Provide baby with his or her own crib and a firm mattress. Avoid soft sleep surfaces, like pillows, quilts, sheepskins, sofas, waterbeds, or air mattresses. These increase the risk of suffocation.

If you can't afford a safe crib, contact the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department at 457-8921. We may be able to help you get one through the Safe Sleep for Baby program sponsored by Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, the Montana Coalition.

Keep pillows, blankets, crib bumpers, stuffed animals, and other soft objects out of the crib when baby is sleeping. Keep pets and other children away, too. Babies can suffocate if they press their face up against anything soft.

Dress baby in a sleeper instead of using blankets, again to avoid suffocation.

Don't overdress your baby. Overheating can lead to SIDS. If the room temperature is comfortable for you, then it's comfortable for your baby.

Make sure no one smokes in your home or around your baby. Studies show that exposure to smoke is a health risk for your baby both before and after birth. It also has been identified as one of the greatest risk factors for SIDS. Even the smoke particles that settle on a smoker's clothes and hair can harm an infant's developing respiratory system.

Finally, make sure anyone and everyone who cares for your child is aware of these recommendations.

The local FICMR team would be delighted to have no more reason to get together.

Melanie Reynolds is the Health Officer at the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department. The mission of the Health Department is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.